



Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew “Bring a Parent to School Day” was coming up. There had been a flyer in Amelia’s backpack, or one of those dreadful robo-calls, or maybe both? Whatever the source, I had long ago relegated the information to some obscure part of my mental hard drive, one of those “folders” where you file things you don’t feel right about trashing... but have no real intention of revisiting.

I remember thinking, *Sure... like I have time to spend an entire workday at school. And even if I did, Amelia wouldn’t want me to, right?*

Wrong. She jumped in the car last Monday afternoon on a mission. “Mom, I know how busy you are... and I know you probably don’t have time... but can you PLEASE come to school with me tomorrow? It’s parents’ day. PLEASE?”

I caught her face in the rearview mirror. Puppy dog eyes. The kid was making puppy dog eyes.

“Is that tomorrow? Why haven’t you mentioned it before now? I have so much to do tomorrow! Do you really want me to come? Really? Are the other parents coming...?”

I am the late-blooming mother of an only child, and most of my friends either have grown children or none at all, so I’m always on my own with this school stuff. I never know the protocol. Does everybody go to these things? Does *anybody*? If I don’t go, does that make me a terrible parent? I had no clue.

“Lots of parents are coming!” Amelia assured me. “I really, really want you there, Mom. Please?”

I thought about the mountain of press releases in my work folder. The unedited articles. The unanswered emails. The unwritten column...

Then, sheepishly, I thought of all the times I’d used, “Maybe I can get a column out of it!” as an excuse to ditch work for some movie or lecture or art exhibit...

“Please, Mommy?”

Mommy. She knows that kills me. And, again, with the puppy dog eyes.

Needless to say, I spent the next day in the fifth grade at Lady’s Island Intermediate School.

As it turns out, “lots of parents” was an exaggeration on my daughter’s part. I was one of three moms from Amelia’s class to show up for homeroom. Two or three more parents – and one grandfather – drifted in later, but only after the early arrivals had departed. I was the only parent who stayed all day. (And, yes, I’m claiming my bragging rights!)

If it's been a while since you hung out with the 10-11 year old set, let me tell you... it's a pleasure. No longer clingy, needy, whiny tots... neither are they yet sullen, cynical, world-weary teens. They are "tweens." And tweens are delightful. They come in all shapes and sizes – it's amazing to see the disparity in height at this age – and they're bright and funny and full of energy. Two of the boys had casts on their arms, and the girls were notable for the creative ways they'd sought to embellish their school uniforms – funky earrings, belts, hair bows, socks. (Incidentally, a quick survey revealed that *all* the kids hate wearing uniforms. Who can blame them, really?)

First period was Language Arts. I'd been warned that it was 100 minutes long, which was fine by me. (One hundred minutes in my comfort zone, baby!) The kids punctuated some sentences, drilled some vocabulary words, discussed the "elements of story," and wrote a short essay imagining themselves as old people. I forced my guidance and instruction upon them whenever humanly possible, which I'm certain endeared me to the teacher. In any case, time flew!

(Class was interrupted briefly by a tornado drill – very exciting – and you'll be interested to know that the children still sit on their knees, facing the wall, with their heads down.)

Next up was Media Arts. Amelia was disappointed because the teacher – one of her favorites – was absent. But the sub was a blast, and the kids had fun writing and illustrating short stories using a computer program. Amelia's assignment? "Write a brief biography of a powerful president who thinks she is a cartoon character." Hmmm.... What ever happened to, "What I Did On My Summer Vacation"?

Recess was too short, as was lunch. (Some things never change.) Then it was time for the class I'd been dreading all day. Math. *One hundred minutes* of Math. My daughter adores math and is very good at it. As for me... just typing the word is making my hands sweat and my throat close up. The thought of spending 100 minutes with a bunch of gifted-and-talented math students – and their near-legendary teacher, a retired Marine whose claim to fame is his passion for *sharks* – well, that was intimidating enough. But on top of that, the kids were taking a Unit Test that day... and the parents were expected to take it, too. (Amelia had neglected to share this detail in a timely manner, knowing it might be grounds for my backing out of the day entirely. Crafty child.) Fortunately, I had helped her study the night before – and by "helped" I mean "watched her solve problems I couldn't solve" – so the material wasn't completely unfamiliar. Nevertheless, I was one of the last to turn in my test – an experience which, I'm sorry to report, does not grow less mortifying with age.

But that wasn't even the worst of it. After the test, the "math" teacher started regaling the parents with *history* questions.

"Who was the only president never elected to the office?" ("Gerald Ford!" cried the *smart* mom across the room.)

"Who did he replace as VP?" ("Spiro Agnew!" quoth the same smart mom.)

"Who was president during the American Revolution?" (At this point, I'm suffering heart palpitations and beginning to black out, but through my dark, speckled haze, I see the teacher – I now think of him as Shark Man – looking right at me. Smart Mom is ominously silent. The room is spinning...)

Wait! This is a trick question. Shark Man is famous for them...

"There *was* no president during the American Revolution!" I blurt.

"That is correct," says Shark Man. I feel Amelia exhale beside me. Saved from total humiliation. For now.

Later, after some terrifying math drills on the board, I learn that I've miraculously managed to squeak out a 92 on my Unit Test, which, in my day, was a good, solid A-. (Nowadays, it's a B.) For the record, Smart Mom – whom I used to like – made a 96. Amelia, of course, beat us both with a 105. It is now official: I am not smarter than a fifth grader.

Social Studies and Science are kind of a blur. By the time they rolled around, I was too wrung out from the trauma of Math to pay much attention. I know Amelia has good teachers, because she talks about these classes often and seems very engaged with the material. In Social

Studies, they're doing a unit on the Cold War, and just last night, she struck up a breezy conversation about Communism.

"Okay, Mom," she said. "Here's how it works. Imagine if Cally and Ben (her aunt and uncle) had jobs and worked really hard, and you and Daddy didn't work at all. But then you all got paid the same amount of money. Cally and Ben would get pretty mad after a while, and they might even decide to stop working altogether. Why should they work hard if they're just gonna get the same amount of money as people who don't work at all? With Capitalism, you get to keep what you earn. That's fair. Communism's not fair!"

I was pretty impressed with her grasp of the concept. My husband said, later, that it sounded more like Socialism than Communism, and maybe he was right. I'm a little rusty. All I knew was that Amelia's grandmother – my mother – would be very pleased to hear about this conversation, and would probably be sending the Social Studies teacher a thank you note.

But back to school. The day ended where it had begun, in the girls' locker room. Loud, hot, crowded... just like they've always been. Girls talking, laughing, filling their book bags, brushing their hair... Where did they get all this energy? I was exhausted. Kaput. Ready to go. Starting to obsess over all the work I'd have to catch up on... kicking myself for staying so long... *All day?! What was I thinking?!*

Then... from somewhere behind me, out of the noisy din of raucous chatter, I heard my daughter's voice – the most beautiful sound in the world – say, "Yeah, my mom's awesome."

I went home and started boning up on my math skills. Next year, I'm shooting for a 97. Consider yourself warned, Smart Mom.

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